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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001347

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SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH (FINALLY) MEETS WITH AKP
MINISTERS

Classified By: Consul General David L. Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b) and (

d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I met with FonMin Abdullah Gul and IntMin Abdulkadir Aksu on August 8 and 12, respectively. Though both ministers publicly and warmly received Bartholomew, the meetings did not yield any concrete steps forward on property issues or recognition of the Patriarch's ecumenical status. Much ground remains to be covered in resolving property and recognition problems. END SUMMARY.

Bartholomew meets with Gul

2. (C) The Ecumenical Patriarchate requested formal meetings with the new government months ago, but Bartholomew was only received on August 8 by FonMin Abdullah Gul and on August 12 by IntMin Abdulkadir Aksu (note: this meeting follows a personal appeal by Greek FonMin Papandreu during a recent visit to Istanbul). Metropolitan Meliton of Philadelphia, who attended the meetings with Gul and with Aksu, reported that Gul warmly received the Patriarch, who made a brief presentation about the activities of the Patriarchate both within Turkey and internationally. Bartholomew then discussed the many property issues which have been problematic for the Greek community and Patriarchate for many years. Per Meliton, Gul professed surprise at the extent to which the General Directorate for Foundations had caused the Patriarchate problems, and requested further information on the Patriarchate's complaints. After further legal explanation by Keban Hatemi, attorney for the Patriarchate who was also in attendance, Gul said that the AK government is working on new policies and regulations intended to make improvements in religious freedom in Turkey, for Muslims and all believers. At the conclusion of the meeting, Gul reiterated to reporters that he had promised to continue working with the Patriarchate on property issues, including re-opening the Halki Seminary.

Aksu Blames the State

3. (C) Like Gul, Aksu voiced a willingness to work with the Patriarchate and a recognition of past injustices to the religious minorities. Meliton reported that Aksu said past problems were the result of "a consolidated state policy," and hoped that "in time healthier conditions will be formed to solve these problems." Aksu, per Meliton, said that past judicial decisions against minority foundations "are not befitting of democratic institutions."

No 'Ecumenical' For a While

4. (C) Meliton said that, in a brief interchange, Gul asked the Patriarch to continue supporting Turkey in the public sphere, as the current climate was difficult for Turkey. Per Meliton, the Patriarch said that as a Turkish citizen, he had always voiced strong support for Turkey in national and international settings. However, he had also been honest about the problems (property issues and ecumenical status) he encounters. Gul, and later Aksu, both made a request that the Patriarch not use the title Ecumenical until January, 2004. Aksu said that the reason for this was that PM Erdogan was planning to attend a meeting in Istanbul of the European Popular Party in October of this year, (a conference the Patriarch typically participates in), but would be unable if conference materials used the Ecumenical title.

5. (C) Per Meliton, the Patriarch told Gul that he could not

disavow the ecumenical status of the Patriarch, which had been recognized since the 6th century, but that he would, as a show of good faith, ask that the title not be printed in conference materials. However, Bartholomew said, he could not prevent other conference attendees from using the title in referring to him. Meliton said that Gul was not very happy with this response. Meliton also noted that Gul said two FonMin ambassadors might be sent to the conference in Erdogan's place.

Media Reaction

16. (C) Extensive press coverage and commentary, particularly following the Gul meeting, focused primarily on the possible opening of the Halki Seminary. The more right-wing nationalist press greeted the prospect with predictable paranoid hostility while some of the liberal columnists magnanimously welcomed the idea. The Islamist press, meanwhile, was also warm to the idea, while the die-hard secularist writers openly warned that AK and its Islamist supporters sought only to use Halki to establish a precedent for loosening state control of Islamic education and training.

Comment

17. (C) Despite the delay in receiving Bartholomew, these meetings may be a positive sign that the new government, as it moves aggressively to advance EU harmonization reforms, will also take further steps to improve the situation of Turkey's religious minority communities. Even assuming the government is well-intentioned, however (and does not intend to use the minorities as a foil for a separate Islamic agenda), addressing the difficult property and religious freedom issues and pressing the state bureaucracy to change its behavior will be a long, uphill struggle.

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